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SUBJECT: OPPOSITION CANDIDATE PARDO DISCUSSES ELECTIONS AND BILATERAL
ISSUES WITH AMBASSADOR

REF: 09 BOGOTA 3097

CLASSIFIED BY: William R. Brownfield, Ambassador; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

SUMMARY

11. (C) Liberal Party Director and presidential candidate Rafael Pardo predicted that: the Uribe coalition would maintain its congressional majority in the March 14 election, independent Sergio Fajardo would have a tough time winning the presidency due to a lack of congressional support, President Uribe would win reelection in the first round if allowed to run, and if Uribe did not run, any of his coalition candidates would be forced to a second round in the May 30 presidential election. Pardo lamented that opposition candidates had been unable to agree on inter-party presidential primaries, but said that parties could still join forces after the congressional election or the first presidential round. He complained that if the Constitutional Court allowed the reelection referendum to proceed, opponents would not have time to campaign against it.

12. (C) Pardo told the Ambassador he supported Plan Colombia and the U.S.-Colombia Defense Cooperation Agreement, but would increase the GOC's focus on agricultural and land issues to improve consolidation efforts if elected. Pardo advised that declarations about Venezuela by USG officials visiting Colombia were unhelpful. He hoped to pull Colombia out of USG-BRV tensions. End Summary.

AMBASSADOR ENGAGES TOP PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES

13. (SBU) On January 15, the Ambassador hosted a private breakfast for Liberal Party (PL) Presidential Candidate Rafael Pardo, who is also the head of the PL (by far the largest opposition party in the country). Pardo was accompanied by PL Senator Juan Fernando Cristo. This was the last in a series of individual breakfasts the Ambassador hosted with the seven leading candidates to replace President Uribe: Juan Manuel Santos (U Party), Sergio Fajardo

(independent), Noemi Sanin (Conservative Party, PC), Gustavo Petro (Alternative Democratic Pole, PDA), Andres Felipe Arias (PC), German Vargas Lleras (Radical Change, CR), and Pardo. These private meetings provided an opportunity to lay the groundwork for continued collaboration with Colombia's next Administration, as well as to discuss election politics.

CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS:

URIBE COALITION WILL HOLD

14. (C) Citing polls and political trends, Pardo predicted that President Uribe's coalition would keep its congressional majority in the March 14 election (which will elect all 102 members of the Senate and all 166 members of the House). His predictions, as well as each party's share of seats (combining House and Senate) after the 2006 elections and after the September 2009 party-switching, are in the following table:

PARTY	Pardo Est.	Sept 2009	March 2006
U+PC	40-50%	48%	36%
PL	20-25%	22%	20%
PDA	10%	7%	6%
CR	7-8%	11%	13%
Others	10-18%	13%	25%

15. (SBU) Pardo noted that congressional elections are much easier to predict than presidential elections, as Colombians mainly vote along party lines for Congress but vote for individual personalities for president. This explains why congressional campaign slogans and ads focus on party membership rather than issues.

NO OPPOSITION COALITION FOR NOW

16. (C) Given President Uribe's 70% popularity and election polls, most analysts agree that opposition candidates must band together in order to stand any chance to win the Presidency in the May 30 election. However, Pardo confirmed press reports that attempts to negotiate an inter-party primary had failed. He had directly approached PDA's Petro, CR's Vargas, and even the Green Party, but ideological differences and personal ambitions had prevented agreement.

17. (C) While there would not be inter-party primaries, Pardo said that an agreement after the congressional elections or after the first round of presidential elections could be possible. He said party leaders could strike a deal amongst themselves or could instruct their voters to support another candidate once their candidates were eliminated from contention. Another option would be a mixed ticket with a presidential candidate from one party and a VP from another, something that is permitted under Colombian law but has never been used.

FAJARDO WILL FIZZLE, URIBE

OR SANTOS MOST LIKELY TO WIN

18. (C) Pardo said that although independent Fajardo was doing relatively well in the polls, no candidate had ever won the Presidency in Colombia without first having strong congressional support. This included Uribe in 2002, who as an independent candidate had the support of large swaths of legislators before he was elected President for the first time. Pardo felt that Fajardo's new "Citizen Commitment" movement would win at most 8% of congressional seats if it had a "miraculous showing." This weak congressional backing coupled with his lack of party infrastructure would stop Fajardo from getting the votes necessary to win a presidential election. He also noted that polls show that Fajardo does well in big cities, but less so in rural areas or nationwide.

19. (C) Pardo agreed with conventional wisdom (and poll predictions) that if Uribe is allowed to run for a third term, he would win in the first round. If Uribe does not run but blesses a successor, Pardo thinks the election would go to a second round. He said Santos would fare best among the pro-Uribe candidates (possibly

getting 40% of the vote in the first round), but would not get all the votes from the PC, independents, and others that were loyal to Uribe but not to Santos or the U Party. Pardo was trying to place himself as close to the center as possible, hoping to draw votes from both the right and left and refraining from criticizing any competitors or parties who were also opposed to reelection.

REELECTION REFERENDUM COMPLAINTS

110. (C) Like most other opposition candidates, Pardo complained about the lack of guarantees designed to level the playing field between a sitting president-candidate and opposition aspirants. He did not fault Uribe for not declaring himself a candidate, as Uribe could not legally do so unless the Constitution were changed. But he said the uncertainty was stifling campaigns, and that if the Constitutional Court allowed the referendum to go forward, the referendum would be rushed with little opportunity for anti-reelection forces to campaign against it. Pardo echoed worries that Colombian institutions had already been harmed by the 2006 reelection's damage to checks-and-balances, and would be further weakened if the referendum process proceeded.

PLAN COLOMBIA, CONSOLIDATION, LAND, & IDPs

111. (C) Pardo, who was named Peace Commissioner in 1988 and then President Cesar Gaviria's Minister of Defense until 1994, called Plan Colombia a success. If elected, he would increase linkages to agricultural policies in order to improve consolidation and prevent future conflicts. He would also appoint a special envoy to each region, in order to centralize consolidation efforts. For regions with good local governance, the envoy would be a direct link to the central government, while in regions with inept or criminal leaders, the envoy would coordinate GOC programs more directly.

¶12. (C) Like PDA candidate Gustavo Petro, Pardo is a strong proponent of improving land titling and redistributing land from large criminal "mafias" to small farmers. The Ambassador and Pardo also discussed Colombia's 4 million displaced individuals, with Pardo agreeing that different policies were needed for those who had permanently settled into new areas versus those who still hoped to return to their homelands.

DCA, VENEZUELA & CUBA

¶13. (C) Pardo reiterated his support for the U.S.-Colombia Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA), as well as his views that DCA communications could have been handled better and that the DCA should have been approved by the Colombian Congress. Pardo advised that declarations about Venezuela by USG officials visiting Colombia were unhelpful. He hoped to separate the USG's tensions with Venezuela from Colombia's issues with Venezuela. He also noted that bellicose Venezuelan statements often came during or just after Chavez visits to Havana.

¶14. (C) Senator Cristo, from the border department of Norte de

Santander, requested that the USG focus more attention on areas near the Venezuelan border. Calling drug trafficking and crime virtually unchecked in those areas, he suggested increased USG counternarcotics and development activities.

COMMENT

¶15. (C) Pardo was frank, accepted political realities and demonstrated a mastery of polling data. His lack of confidence in his PL doing better in upcoming elections reflects the weak turnout for the PL's presidential primaries (reftel) and Uribe's steady high popularity. Pardo cannot easily veer to the left with Petro or to the right with Vargas or others without alienating a portion of the PL base. He is publicly outspoken in his opposition to the Uribe coalition, hoping to capture as many anti-reelection votes as possible. While Pardo seems to have concluded that he will not win the Presidency, he is focused on helping the PL in the congressional elections and is open to joining forces with other parties. Given his experience as minister and senator, Pardo asked informed questions regarding USG policies. Although his knowledge, experience and political savvy would make him a great minister, advisor or campaign manager, his elite background and lack of charisma make him a relatively weak presidential candidate.

BROWNFIELD